

Eritrea-China Medical Cooperation: A Quarter Century of Progress



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Several days ago, local media outlets reported on how members of the Chinese medical team, working side by side with Eritrean doctors, have been performing complex spinal surgeries on local patients at the Halibet Hospital in Asmara. The extremely technical operations, which are the first-ever procedures of their kind performed within Eritrea, are an exciting landmark in the country's medical sector and history. Coinciding with the 25th anniversary of the first dispatch of Chinese medical teams to Eritrea, the recent surgeries also serve as a timely and powerful reflection of the longstanding ties and enduring friendship between China and Eritrea, especially within the area of health. For a quarter of a century, health-related cooperation between China and Eritrea has positively contributed to the lives and wellbeing of people nationwide and also helped to move the country's health system forward.

The history of health cooperation between Africa and China

Although it has received increasing attention in recent years, China's engagement with Africa actually dates back centuries and spans a number of ancient dynasties. Modern Sino-African ties can be traced to the earliest years of African independence in the 1950s and 1960s. Since then, China has become the continent's leading trading partner, while Chinese investment in and lending to African countries have grown rapidly. Over the years, the relationship has

steadily broadened to reach into an array of other sectors, including culture, digital infrastructure and technology, security, and education.

Health, too, has been an increasingly critical area of cooperation, with China extending support to build or renovate many hospitals and health facilities across the continent. Additionally, China has worked with African countries to establish thousands of scholarships and short-term training opportunities for African students, as well as provided significant funding support for health projects or programs, medicines, and equipment.

Perhaps the flagship of China's multifaceted health-related cooperation with Africa has been its medical teams. Since April 1963, when it first sent a group of doctors to Algeria, China has sent numerous medical teams – coming to an overall total of over 20,000 doctors, nurses, clinicians, and other health professionals – to nearly every country across the continent. These highly diverse teams have provided vital, indeed often life-saving, services, helped train countless local personnel, collaborated with local personnel on research, and contributed to building capacity and strengthening local health systems. Importantly, they have generally been well-received and commended by their host countries, as well as ultimately helped to strengthen Sino-Africa bonds.



Eritrea and China's cooperation within health

As with Africa, Eritrea's engagement with China is not a new or recent one. In fact, it stretches back almost 2,000 years, to as early as about 100AD, involving maritime trade and commercial activities, as well as the dispatch of emissaries.

However, contemporary ties can be traced back to Eritrea's long struggle for independence, when China offered some support to Eritrea's independence movement. Subsequently, formal diplomatic relations began after Eritrea's official independence in May 1993. China soon opened an embassy in Asmara. Since then, the Eritrea-China partnership has steadily expanded and strengthened. Among the most extensive and important areas of bilateral cooperation has been the health sector.

Opened in 2003 following three years of construction, Eritrea's largest medical facility and first fully-equipped, modern hospital, Orotta Hospital, was built through the close partnership of Eritrea and China. Close bilateral cooperation in subsequent years has resulted in regular upgrades to and considerable expansions of the facility, which serves patients from across the country. China has also donated medical equipment and medicines that are in use in facilities nationwide.

In addition, since 1997, a total of 15 Chinese medical teams, comprising well over 200 doctors and health professionals, have worked in Eritrea. During deployments that have lasted 1-2 years, these teams have worked closely alongside Eritrean health professionals to provide high-quality medical services and support general health improvements. Notably, the transfer of skills and knowledge, along with the sharing of experiences, have been a significant element of the cooperative framework. Through formal training and mentoring, demonstration and observation, and the introduction of new techniques or approaches (such as on traditional Chinese medical practices and medicines), the medical teams have helped to reinforce Eritrea's health capacity, while also expanding and strengthening the skills of local health personnel. At the same time, the visiting medical teams have had the opportunity to learn from Eritrean colleagues, as well as grow and develop professionally from experiencing cases that may be unique or completely different to what they are familiar with.

Partnership based on mutual respect and shared principles

A key factor that underlies the success of health-related cooperation between Eritrea and China, as well as the broader close relationship that they share, has been their firm commitment to the principle of mutual understanding, trust, and

respect. Generally, relations between the two countries are based on a “win-win” approach and both countries maintain a strong commitment to sovereignty, non-intervention, and non-interference in the internal affairs of others. They both also firmly believe in the centrality of multilateralism and the UN-centered international system.

The two countries’ approaches to international assistance and development also closely align, providing a solid foundation for their health partnership to thrive and succeed. The Eritrean government has historically insisted on establishing genuine partnerships and cooperation, while retaining firm control of its development agenda and local implementation. It encourages assistance that addresses specific needs which cannot be met internally, which is designed to minimize continued external support, and which complements and strengthens, instead of replaces, the country’s own institutional capacity to implement projects. This approach is rooted in a great desire to avoid crippling dependence (as has sadly been the historical case in so many countries where aid has seemed to harm instead of help development efforts), as well as ensure local agency and foster a strong, clear sense of responsibility for and genuine ownership of the country’s future among all citizens.



For its part, China’s own approach to assistance shares considerably close similarities. For instance, Article IV of China’s principles of foreign aid states that aid, “is not intended to result in the recipient countries’ dependence on China, but to help recipient countries gradually become self-reliant and

economically independent.” Furthermore, China’s assistance has historically been anchored in equality and mutual benefit with no strings attached, while the country has generally refrained from imposing ideology, values, or development models on other countries.

A quarter century of progress and enduring friendship

The quarter century of bilateral health cooperation between Eritrea and China, which is just one dimension of their larger and still growing relationship, has been productive and extremely positive. Not only has it helped to promote the health and wellbeing of locals, while additionally contributing to building the capacity of the national health system, it has also strengthened the longstanding bonds between the two countries.

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